

CELEBRATION OF
LIFE OF
MATTHEW RAMCHORAN
RAMCHORAN

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In 1976 Matthew and I and 23 other heads of diplomatic missions went on a tour of the Arctic and the North-West Territories. In Yellowknife there was a large dinner party and Matthew and the man on his right fell quickly and easily into conversation which flowed merrily for the three hours the occasion lasted.

At the end of the meal Matthew as the most senior ambassador present made a speech thanking our hosts for their bounteous hospitality. The man to whom he had been talking replied. And there and then he took off his gold cuff-links and presented them to Matthew with the words "Matthew you are the most companionable man I have ever met. Please accept these links from me who has only met you for three hours and yet feels he has known you all his life"

None of us who worked with Matthew was surprised at this. It happened everywhere he went. For he was a very companionable person companionable in his speech, companionable in his silence. He had a talent for listening - rare in our compulsively palavering culture - and he listened intently sensitively, compassionately and often twinklingly.

But the links he was given were not just an impulsively beautiful gift. They were a symbol of Matthew's whole career. He spent his life forging links between individuals, between whole people, between nations. And he did it with a quiet skill and gently touch that was unique.

If diplomacy is about building bridges between sovereignties and between peoples then Matthew was a consummate diplomat because he was a master bridge builder.

He was Trinidad's first High Commissioner to Jamaica (1962) and his task was almighty difficult because the Federation of the West Indies had recently collapsed, taking with it the dream of a West Indian nation; and leaving behind it exasperation, recrimination and a sense of waste.

But quickly a warm and genuine friendship sprung up between Matthew and Alexander Bustamante- a friendship which laid the basis for a reapproachment between Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

Not for the first time and not for the last Matthew performed a delicate diplomatic miracle; he was as much a friend to Alexander Bustamante as he was of Norman Manley probably two of the most robust political rivals that the West Indies have seen this century.

Both in Jamaica and in Venezuela - which was his next posting Matthew showed himself to be, not a rarified diplomat, but a peoples diplomat. He talked to all sorts of groups - chambers of commerce, learned societies, trade unions, service clubs, professional associations and university students.

The politician in him delighted in creating constituencies; the diplomat in him enjoyed putting his country's perspective across. The man rejoiced in meeting people.

He spoke Spanish fluently and with subtlety. He read not only Latin American politics and economics but Latin American literature always a springboard into the heart of a nation. He was the first West Indies diplomat to be awarded the Order of the Liberator, Venezuela's highest national honour. And fittingly so. For it was his diplomacy that inspired Venezuela's sponsorship of Trinidad and Tobago's entry into the Organisation of American States.

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When Guyana and Venezuela became locked in a dangerous dispute over Venezuela's claim to one third of Guyana's territory, it was Matthew who suggested to Prime Minister Eric Williams that Trinidad and Tobago would make the perfect honest broker since, she was a member of the OAS, a sister Caribbean Country to Guyana, and an equally strong member of the Commonwealth. That suggestion finally bore fruit in the Protocol of Port of Spain signed by Guyana and Venezuela which put the boundary dispute in cold storage for twelve years and gave Guyana the breathing speace she needed.

Matthew was educated at both primary and secondary schools by the Canadian Presbyterian Church; and in 1968 he returned the compliment when he arrived in Canada as Trinidad and Tobago's High Commissioner. He and Flora and four of their Daughters spent eight very happy years in this country. Characteristically they made friends with a wide variety of Canadians and West Indian emigres - with members of parliament, mandarins bureaucrats, business people, academics, clerics, WGO people and above all with students. In this they were greatly assisted by Matthew's and Flora's skill as bridge players and Matthew's passion for horse racing.

When he returned to Trinidad he went back to his law practice. But not for long. For he was soon Speaker of the House a job to which he brought a profound knowledge of the constitution, his penchant for listening and tremendous patience. Like so many of his distinguished contemporaries Matthew fused many careers into a harmonious mosaic. He began his working life as a school teacher, moved on to the Bar, was a member of Parliament both before and after independence and a Minister of Labour. Indeed he was a Lawyer with a yen for history, a politician with a passion for diplomacy, a diplomat with a love for people.

He carried a lot of his country's history in his person. A foundation member of the PNM, he was also one of the drafters of Trinidad and Tobago's constitution; and an intimate friend and colleague of Eric Williams, of Ellis Clarke the President and of most of the people who brought his country to independence and steered its destiny for many years afterwards.

A statesman unquestionably; a seer, yes. But he was something more profoundly human than either of those - a wonderful family man. Indeed his love of people began with his family though it ~~did~~ not end there. He had the happiest of marriages and for 41 years he and Flora shared the blessings and the joys of a close and warm family life with their five Daughters. He was both their father and their friend, devoting a lot of time to their company, even when his schedule was at its heaviest. The girls say that they had two educations: one from their schools which was good; and one from their father which was inspired. He distilled all his experience and wisdom to initiate them into the ways of the world and its peoples. And he gave them his own great gift-intellectual curiosity.

Nothing pleased him more than to have the whole family together. And they repaid his love with magnificent devotion. Their lives revolved around their father as planets do a sun. And their strength is as the strength of ten because their family life is sure. Matthew was no solemn patriarch: he was a surreptitious tease, a master of comic surprise which he never betrayed beforehand because, when he willed it, His face could be a perfect sphinx. His sense of family remained with him to the end. He waited till all the girls had arrived on Saturday night-Paddy was the last to come - then he gave up his hold on this life.

If his family was his supreme joy, following not far behind was his pleasure in young people. The teacher that he once was he never ceased to be. Talking to youth reinvigorated him and they found him as interesting as he found them. They never left his presence without feeling there was plenty to do in the world and doing it was an unqualified adventure. With little children Matthew was pure magic. They brought out the little boy in him which was always there and with it a perennial sense of wonder. He communicated that wonder to them with affection and laughter. To watch him with his grand-children was to see a man of whom the psalmist wrote "blessed is he who hath a quiver full of such arrows". Children took him back to a world that was fresh and green - a world where wishes truly were horses and even grandfathers could ride.

Horses and riders were an important part of Matthew's life. Like so many of his countrymen he had an unremitting zest for the races. Betting was in his blood and the speculation, the tension, the triumph when his favourite horse won, the disappointment when it lost as well as the piconq- that unique Trinidadian concoction of liquid banter and witty concature - those were meat and drink to him. Last year he told me "Bobby if you take up horse racing as a hobby you will never grow old" I go to the races age 71: I come back age 51".

But he did not really need an external antidote to old age. His temperament was antidote enough. It was a temperament whose supreme qualities were intellectual peace, humility and compassion. Whatever turmoil raged abroad or around him Matthew remained a soul at one with itself and that gave him his great strength. The extraordinary thing about him is how little he talked about how much he had done. He tended to take himself for granted and to give others a lot of the credit that was his own. Despite all of that he was a true visionary: a man of the day before yesterday and of the day after tomorrow.

Like Eric Williams he took strength from the past and blueprints from the future and he refused to be imprisoned by the present.

Matthew lived much of his life in the sweep of big events but he had a lot of time for little people. He always said that there was much more power in them than they knew. When last year I gave him my favourite quotation "THERE ARE NO LITTLE PEOPLE ONLY PEOPLE WHO DO NOT KNOW HOW BIG THEY ARE", he beamed and said "that sums up my life's philosophy" Whether he was talking to a president or a peasant his manner was the same: courteous, understanding, sensitive, helpful. There are scores of people in Trinidad now who say that Matthew taught them their worth and set them on their way.

My enduring memory of him is seeing him communing with the Dawn. At his house in Arima he rose in the morning before the sun and sat on his back verandah drawing freshness of spirit from the dew on the flowers and the leaves in his garden. His silence was complete and contemplative. The trees confirmed his own serenity and enhanced his sense of stability. They spoke to him of rootedness, of the beauty of giving and the grace of receiving, and of outspreading comfort. They also spoke to him of another world whose rhythms are never hurried whose purposes are never ultimately thwarted and whose heart is compassion.

He has gone to that other world and we are grateful that he came out way and enriched us by his being. On behalf of the people of three continents and many islands we thank Flora and his family for giving him so much so that he might give so much to all of us.

EULOGY WRITTEN BY: DR. ROBERT MOORE
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